Marshall Memo 495

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 22, 2013

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Despite substantial investments in reading instruction over the past two decades, far too many U.S. students remain poor readers, which has profound implications for these children and for the nation."

Alan Cheung and Robert Slavin (see item #4)

"Learning to read is a complex task in which many things must go right for a student to become successful."

Alan Cheung and Robert Slavin (*ibid.*)

"Young people's technology use is really about quelling anxiety. They don't want to miss out. They don't want to be the last person to hear some news, or the ninth person to 'like' someone's post."

Larry Rosen (see item #2)

"I don't care if a kid wants to tweet while she's watching *American Idol*, or have music on while he plays a video game. But when students are doing serious work with their minds, they have to have focus."

Victoria Rideout (*ibid.*)

"Each second that passes is beyond recall. When we say we want to 'save time,' we are really saying we wish we could do more things in a short space of time, so we can spend more time on other things."

Ray Cross (see item #3)

"It may seem ironic that, in order to save time, you must first *spend* time."

Ray Cross (*ibid.*)

1. Making Teacher Evaluations Accurate, Fair, Consistent, and Helpful

In this *Education Week* article, Kim Marshall acknowledges that the common practice of sending principals to off-site training to improve their teacher-evaluation skills can be helpful, but argues that there are no shortcuts to superintendents taking care of five key items *within* their districts:

• *Getting principals to make enough classroom visits to see daily reality* – "Let's face it," says Marshall, "teacher evaluation based on infrequent, announced classroom visits is inaccurate, ineffective, and dishonest. To see how teachers are performing day to day, principals need to be in each classroom at least once a month for short, unannounced visits, followed by face-to-face conversations." Superintendents should be clear about this expectation and hold principals accountable.

• *Ensuring that every principal really does have a good eye for instruction* – The starting point is a clear, rubric-based definition of highly effective, effective, mediocre, and unsatisfactory teaching within the district and a commitment to take action when teaching is in the bottom two categories. To ensure this happens, superintendents need to be in schools on a weekly basis and each time, visit one or two classrooms with the principal, step into the corridor, and ask about the key teaching points. "All principals need this kind of boots-on-the-ground supervision," says Marshall; it's the best way to continuously improve supervision and evaluation skills, keep the superintendent close to the action, and prevent the kind of grade inflation that's been so common with teacher evaluation over the years.

For superintendents to visit schools this often, they must have a manageable span of control, which means breaking larger districts into clusters of no more than 12-15 schools led by empowered area superintendents (Newark and Boston have recently reorganized along these lines).

• *Polishing principals' skills at giving feedback to teachers* – Marshall suggests several ways to accomplish this:

- Role-playing with principals after classroom visits, with the superintendent playing the teacher;
- Occasionally sitting in on principals' face-to-face feedback talks with teachers;
- Getting principals to do co-observations with instructional coaches to build their content knowledge ("Just because students are sitting around a kidney-shaped table reading a nice book with their teacher doesn't mean that high-quality guided reading is going on," says Marshall);
- Reading a sampling of the short write-ups principals send to teachers after their feedback chats;

- Devoting a segment of monthly principals' meetings to playing a 10-to 15-minute video of a teacher in action; giving principals a minute to look over the notes they have taken; having principals pair up and role-play the principal-teacher conversation; having partners debrief on how the "principal" handled substance, choice of words, eye contact, and body language; having principals switch partners and roles and repeating the role-play and debrief; discussing key teaching points as a whole group; having principals write a practice paragraph to the teacher summing up feedback and next steps; and finally, having principals read their write-up to an elbow partner and then sharing a few of the best paragraphs with the whole group. "This 60- to 70-minute process puts everyone on a steep learning curve developing the skills, confidence, and courage to do this work," says Marshall.

He also recommends periodically conducting anonymous online surveys of teachers with questions like, "Do you have confidence in your supervisor's knowledge of your subject or grade?" and "Has your principal's feedback on your teaching been helpful?"

• *Deciding how and when to use the district's teacher-evaluation rubric* – Marshall believes that when principals try to fill out checklists or rubrics during classroom visits, it's much more difficult for them to be thoughtful, perceptive observers. Better that they should walk around, look over students' shoulders to see the quality and rigor of the work they are doing, ask one or two students, "What are you working on today?", scan wall displays, listen carefully to classroom interactions, and jot a few notes. Marshall also believes that trying to fill out a rubric immediately after a classroom visit is unproductive; that's when the administrator should be deciding on the most important feedback and how to present it in the face-to-face dialogue with each teacher. Marshall advocates using rubrics only at three strategic points in the year:

- In September, when teachers self-assess on the whole rubric and set 2-3 improvement goals.
- In mid-January, when each teacher sits down with the principal and does a page-by-page comparison of the teacher's current self-assessment and the principal's tentative assessment (it's important that they fill out the rubric before the meeting and debate any discrepancies based on the evidence).
- At the end of the year, when the mid-year discussion is repeated based on data from the whole year and the principal decides on summative ratings with the teacher's input.

Do principals have to go through the extremely time-consuming process of gathering evidence on each of the rubric's components? No, says Marshall, because a good rubric acts as an excellent memory prompt for all the data principals take in during classroom visits, conversations with teachers, visits to team meetings, parent and student input, and countless other interactions in the course of the year. There will inevitably be a few gaps in the principal's knowledge, but these can be filled in by the teacher's self-assessment and summative rubric conversations. "This is an amazingly efficient way to review the year's performance," says Marshall, "usually taking less than half an hour per teacher." [Of course, with an unsatisfactory teacher, thorough documentation is necessary.]

What about having principals practice rubric-scoring after watching a short classroom video? The problem with this approach, says Marshall, is that it doesn't simulate the real-world challenge of evaluating an entire year's performance. Better to use ten or so short clips from a film of one teacher's year [such as "The Class", a film about a French teacher with a group of eighth graders] and then have principals score the teacher on one or two domains of the rubric and debate differences based on the evidence they just observed.

• *Keeping student learning at the center of supervisory conversations* – A big worry with teacher evaluation is that principals' ratings won't jibe with student-achievement results. "The worst strategy is to wait for end-of-year test scores, which don't arrive until summer," says Marshall. A better approach is for principals to look at student achievement as it takes shape in classrooms and team meetings: they look to see if teachers are checking for understanding as they teach, immediately putting students' responses to work, and working with their same-grade or same-course colleagues to analyze the results of unit tests, interim assessments, and performance tasks, and continuously improving their teaching. [Superintendents can also keep an eye out for discrepancies between glowing teacher evaluations and faltering student achievement.]

"Perfect inter-rater reliability is unattainable," concludes Marshall; "schools are way too complex. But if superintendents are in classrooms every week, surveying teachers, looking at other data, and using their monthly leadership meetings well, principals will up their game and teachers' evaluations will be increasingly accurate, fair, helpful, and consistent. And that will make a major difference to the quality of teaching and learning."

"How to Make Teacher Evaluations Accurate, Fair, and Consistent" by Kim Marshall in *Education Week*, July 19, 2013, http://bit.ly/12VOkMD

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2. Media Multitasking While Learning

In this thoughtful article in *Slate*, Annie Murphy Paul reports on a study of young people's strong tendency to multitask while doing homework and studying. Researchers from California State University/Dominguez Hills (led by psychology professor Larry Rosen) observed students in their living rooms, dens, kitchens, and bedrooms, capturing data once a minute on what they were doing – right down to the number of windows open on their computers and whether they were using ear-buds. Although students knew they were being observed and had been told to work on something important, within two minutes they were texting, looking at Facebook feeds, making phone calls, etc. Students were on task only about 65 percent of the time they were observed. "We were amazed at how frequently they multitasked," says Rosen, "even though they knew someone was watching. It really seems that they could not go for 15 minutes without engaging their devices. It was kind of scary, actually."

University of Michigan psychology professor David Meyer has this to say about multitasking: "Under most conditions, the brain simply cannot do two complex tasks at the same time. It can happen only when the two tasks are both very simple and when they don't

compete with each other for the same mental resources" – for example, folding laundry and listening to a radio weather report. What happens when students multitask? Psychologists, cognitive scientists, and neuroscientists say that:

- Assignments take longer to complete because of the time distractions take and the time it takes to refocus after an interruption.
- There's more mental fatigue from repeatedly dropping and picking up mental threads, which leads to more mistakes. Task-switching is especially tiring when students move between formal, precise language tasks and informal, colloquial banter.
- Learning is spottier and shallower.
- Students remember less well. "The moment of encoding is what matters most for retention," says Paul, "and dozens of laboratory studies have demonstrated that when our attention is divided during encoding, we remember that piece of information less well – or not at all."
- Students have greater difficulty understanding information and transferring learning to new contexts.

Not surprisingly, students who multitask with technology generally get lower grades in K-12 schools and colleges than students who don't.

Is multitasking a problem in all situations? No, says consultant Victoria Rideout, formerly of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "It's multitasking while learning that has the biggest potential downside. I don't care if a kid wants to tweet while she's watching *American Idol*, or have music on while he plays a video game. But when students are doing serious work with their minds, they have to have focus." That's because texting, e-mailing, and posting on social media are quite mentally complex, drawing on the same brain resources (using language, discerning meaning) as schoolwork.

"Young people's technology use is really about quelling anxiety," says Rosen. "They don't want to miss out. They don't want to be the last person to hear some news, or the ninth person to 'like' someone's post." Eighty percent of college students say they text in class, which he says qualifies as compulsive behavior that must be managed if kids are to learn and perform at their best. The biggest problem is that students don't believe this is a problem: "Young people have a wildly inflated idea of how many things they can attend to at once," says Rosen. Meyer says kids think they can perform two challenging tasks at once, but "they are deluded. There's nothing magical about the brains of so-called 'digital natives' that keeps them from suffering from the inefficiencies of multitasking. They may like to do it, they may even be addicted to it, but there's no getting around the fact that it's far better to focus on one task from start to finish."

Technological gizmos aren't going away, and neither is the compelling desire to be in touch with peers. Academic and professional success, therefore, may depend on the ability to resist the siren song while engaged in serious studying – in other words, to defer gratification. One researcher proposed a new "marshmallow test" for self-discipline – can a student resist a blinking inbox or buzzing phone? [See Marshall Memo 258 for a summary of this classic study.] Rosen suggests that students take two-minute "tech breaks" after every 15 minutes of

focused study to satisfy their cravings for electronic communication – and gradually expand their uninterrupted work time to 20, 30, even 45 minutes.

What can parents do? Rideout suggests that they accept young people's use of technology, but draw a firm line on using it while doing serious studying. "The good thing about this phenomenon is that it's a relatively discrete behavior that parents actually can do something about," she says. "It would be hard to enforce a total ban on media multitasking, but parents can draw a line when it comes to homework and studying – telling their kids , 'This is a time when you will concentrate on just one thing.'"

"You'll Never Learn! Students Can't Resist Multitasking, and It's Impairing Memory" by Annie Murphy Paul in *Slate*, May 3, 2013, http://slate.me/16z8aUP; Rosen's study was published in the May 2013 issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*.

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3. Time Management for Principals (An Oldie but Goodie Article)

In this 1980 article in *The National Elementary Principal*, Ray Cross, then a professor at Corpus Christi State University, shares his wisdom on managing priorities in the principalship. The remarkable thing about this piece is that it was written before e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and the rest of the Internet and is still right on target.

Principals are always looking for ways to "save time," says Cross, but saving time is a misleading concept. "Each second that passes is beyond recall. When we say we want to 'save time,' we are really saying we wish we could do more things in a short space of time, so we can spend more time on other things… The truth is, we cannot manage time; we can only manage ourselves… To gain time, we must perform that most difficult of feats: changing our habits."

Cross says there are three basic principles of time management: clustering similar activities; doing one thing at a time; and buffering ourselves from activities that aren't a good use of our time now – or ever. Here are some ways these principles play out in a school:

• *That ringing phone* – Have your secretary handle calls, answer questions, refer callers to someone who might be able to help them, and if they persist in wanting to talk to you, offer to take their name and number and have you call back later. If they're still insistent, your secretary should ask whether they want to interrupt you, "neatly placing responsibility for that decision with the caller," says Cross.

• *The call-back system* – Call people when it's convenient for you, with the information you need at your fingertips, and end the call when it's done – all good time-savers. When people are rudely keeping you on the phone past their time, tell them you have to attend to an emergency or hang up in the middle of one of your own sentences (they rarely call back).

• *Minimizing telephone socializing* – Cross says "it is indeed possible to have a courteous, businesslike conversation without reviewing the weather report or replaying last Saturday's big game."

• *Minimizing drop-ins* – "How do you receive visitors who have legitimate business while fending off those who are excessively sociable, and do it all with courtesy?" asks Cross.

He suggests positioning your desk out view of passersby, using your secretary as a buffer, coming out of your office to talk to people in neutral territory where you can terminate the conversation more easily, and being available for informal conversations at other times – dropping into the faculty lounge or eating lunch in the cafeteria. This has several advantages, says Cross: "It reduces the number of drop-in visitors; it observes the principle of clustering similar activities; and it makes you less vulnerable to being thought antisocial on those occasions when your behavior is strictly businesslike."

• *Mail* – Again, the secretary should be dealing with a lot of this, and what you do yourself should be handled once.

• *Meetings* – Never call one unless it's necessary, says Cross; start and end on time, share an agenda in advance ("Open-ended meetings invite open-ended, pointless discussions"), and consider stand-up meetings ("too much physical comfort encourages irrelevant discussion").

• *Your partner in time management* – You should be able to trust your secretary to keep the important in front of you, keep the trivial away from you, help you deal with your tendency to procrastinate, serve as a sounding board for ideas, represent you effectively to others, help you keep on top of your reading, and handle work efficiently, confidentially, and without being reminded. Cross suggests checking in on these items with your secretary and working toward a collegial, mutually supportive relationship that lightens your load, keeps you focused on the school's broader purpose, and makes the secretary's job more interesting and important.

• *Taking stock* – Cross suggests keeping a log over a week's time to identify major time-wasters and unproductive patterns ("It may seem ironic that, in order to save time, you must first *spend* time," he says), and then adopt a new time-saving technique each week. "Evolutionary changes of style are more profitable than revolutionary changes," he says. "Reassessments will be necessary from time to time, of course. We all have a tendency to lapse into old habits and relax our self-discipline."

"How to Beat the Clock: Tips on Time Management" by Ray Cross in *The National Elementary Principal*, March 1980, http://1.usa.gov/18z15FW

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4. How Effective Are K-6 Supplementary Computer Reading Programs?

"Despite substantial investments in reading instruction over the past two decades, far too many U.S. students remain poor readers, which has profound implications for these children and for the nation," say Alan Cheung (The Chinese University/Hong Kong) and Robert Slavin (Johns Hopkins University) in this *Reading Research Quarterly* article. "Learning to read is a complex task in which many things must go right for a student to become successful… Different students may be failing to learn to read adequately for different reasons. One student may recognize every letter and sound but be slow and uncertain in blending them into words. Another may be proficient in reading words but does not comprehend them or the sentences in which they appear. Yet another may lack vocabulary needed to comprehend texts."

One-on-one tutoring is the most effective intervention for struggling readers, say Cheung and Slavin, but it's expensive. What about software packages? "In theory, computers can adapt to the individual needs of struggling readers," they say, "building on what they can do and filling in gaps" – plus, they're motivating to students. This article reports on the efficacy of technology products on which there is solid research. The bottom line: effect sizes for almost all products are small (averaging .14) and almost all of them aren't any better than non-computer approaches. Here are the specifics, from the most to the least effective programs:

- Lexia (Phonics-Based Reading and Strategies for Older Students): the mean effect size for Title I students is .67
- Captain's Log (BrainTrain): median effect size .40
- RWT and LIPS for first graders at risk for dyslexia: overall effect size .32
- Fundamental Punctuation Practice, MicroRead, Spelling Program, and Word Attack program for fourth graders: effect size .30
- READ 180 for middle schools: weighted mean effect size of .24
- READ 180 for grade 4-6 students: overall effect size .21
- Jostens (an earlier version of Compass Learning): across three studies, the weighted mean effect size was .19.
- Alpine Skier, Tank Tactics, and Big Door Deal for fifth and sixth graders: median effect size .18
- Across 12 studies of supplemental Computer Assisted Instruction, the weighted mean effect size was .18.
- Thinking Reader: median effect size of .14 in vocabulary and .13 in comprehension
- Destination Reading: median effect size .12
- Computer Network Specialist for grades 2-5: effect sizes averaged .10
- Fast ForWord for grades 3-6: weighted mean effect size .06
- Failure Free Reading for third and fifth graders: combined effect size .05
- ReadAbout for fifth graders: weighted average effect size .04
- READ 180 for grade 4-6 students (in another district): overall effect size .03
- Destination Reading, Waterford, Headsprout, PLATO Focus, and Academy of Reading in first-grade classrooms: mean effect size .02 (the study didn't break down individual programs)
- Leapfrog, READ 180, Academy of Reading, KnowledgeBox for fourth graders: effect size –.01 (no breakdown for individual programs)

"The most important practical implication of the review presented here is that there is a limited evidence base for the use of technology applications to enhance the reading performance of struggling readers in the elementary grades," conclude Cheung and Slavin. "Within the existing literature, however, the largest effect sizes were found for small-group interventions that supplement first-grade instruction with phonetic activities integrating computer and non-computer activities and occupying substantial time each week."

"Effects of Educational Technology Applications on Reading Outcomes for Struggling Readers: A Best-Evidence Synthesis" by Alan Cheung and Robert Slavin in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2013 (Vol. 48, #3, p. 277-299), http://www.bestevidence.org.uk/assets/tech_strug_read_Jul12.pdf; Cheung be reached at alancheung@cuhk.edu.hk.

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5. Questions to Ask Older Students About Their Reading

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, Gay Ivey (University of Wisconsin) and Peter Johnston (SUNY Albany) write about the advantages of adolescents reading self-selected young-adult literature at their own pace (as opposed to reading the same novel together as a class). The interview questions they used with students at the end of the school year are particularly helpful:

- Have teachers this year done anything that made you interested in reading a certain book? What was it?
- Have you read something this year that was so memorable you keep thinking about it or you told someone else about it?
- Have other people this year helped you decide to read certain books? Who? What did they do or say that made you want to read?
- Do you talk with anyone about the books you read? Who do you talk to, and what kinds of things do you talk about?
- Have you started to read a book in school that you found confusing? What happened with that?
- Tell me something about your reading in classes other than English (social studies, science, math, etc.). What has been interesting or challenging about those experiences?
- How has your reading at home changed this year?
- What will happen with your reading this summer?
- What did you learn as a reader this year?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your reading?

"Engagement with Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes" by Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2013 (Vol. 48, #3, p. 255-275), http://bit.ly/1b7SWt5; Ivey can be reached at mgivey@wisc.edu.

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6. Short Item:

The 25 best educational apps – The American Association of School Librarians suggests these apps for teaching and learning, organized under books, STEM, organization and management, social sciences, and content creation:
http://www.ala.org/aasl/standards-guidelines/best-apps/2013

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 42 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest